

K-12 SCHOOLS: CONDITIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR MODIFYING EDUCATIONAL DELIVERY MODELS

Introduction

Central District Health (CDH) recognizes the value of in-person learning and the challenge of balancing the risks of COVID-19 and educational, social, and emotional supports. CDH continues to monitor case activity in our jurisdiction and we are mindful of the efforts underway to make our educational settings safe for all staff, faculty, and students. We are focused on providing information that will allow school boards to appropriately address the educational needs of students.

Central District Health supports transitioning to in-person learning for the 2021-2022 school year. The following outlines the conditions necessary for determining if, and when, to modify educational delivery models (e.g. from remote to hybrid, hybrid to more days in person). Additional considerations are included to minimize the risk in school settings.

CONDITIONS

Stable or declining county case rates. [CDC's weekly case rates](#) are a good indicator of the level of risk in the community. As case rates rise there is an increased risk that COVID-19 will enter into the school from a community exposure. CDH recommends schools monitor closely for spikes or rapid increases, which can make effective contact tracing efforts more challenging for both CDH and the school, and could lead to spread within schools.

Layering mitigation measures. Discussed below are several mitigation measures, including the use of face masks, physical distancing, and screening tests, among other safety measures. CDC and CDH recommend the use of multiple mitigation measures (layering measures) to provide increased protection to students and staff at the school.

Consistent use of face coverings. These remain an effective, low-cost way to reduce transmission. Face coverings should be used consistently and appropriately in school settings by unvaccinated school staff and students, especially when physical distancing cannot take place. Appropriate use of face coverings includes individuals wearing a properly fitted mask that covers their nose and mouth completely. Fully vaccinated individuals may wish to wear a mask and should be supported in this decision.

Adequate physical distancing. Maximize space between individual students and staff, or between small pods (i.e. pods are independently spaced groups limited to 3-5 students). Consider communal areas where monitoring space between intermixing students will be more challenging (bus pick-up and drop off, cafeteria, before and after school, hallway passing). Keep six feet between students as much as possible. Encourage use of outdoor spaces when weather permits and non-traditional instructional space (gyms, libraries, auditoriums).

Additional information on physical distancing is outlined in our [Physical Distancing in Classrooms](#) guidance.

Ability to effectively isolate and quarantine. Bringing more students into school buildings could lead to an increased number of exposures, and schools should be prepared to manage the potential rise. All cases and any exposed contacts must follow isolation and quarantine guidelines outlined by [CDH's K-12 School Quarantine Guidance](#) in conjunction with the current guidelines provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

- If transmission of COVID-19 is occurring in the physical structure or among a specific team or extracurricular event, schools should modify plans and operate under these modified plans for at least two (2) weeks from an identified positive case in order to accurately assess if there is additional risk of transmission occurring.
- Schools should identify individuals who meet the probable case definition and these cases should be contact traced.
- Schools should use the infectious period defined by CDH to determine close contacts.

Screening tests. CDC recommends use of screening tests to help further reduce transmission in the school setting. This strategy is highly recommended in areas with substantial or high community transmission, in areas of low vaccination coverage, or in schools where other prevention strategies are not implemented. This testing is recommended for those who are not fully vaccinated at the school and should be done at least once a week to be effective.

Cleaning and disinfecting. CDC recommends cleaning once a day and doing additional cleaning AND disinfection if a case has been identified in the building. Routinely clean high touch surfaces and objects throughout the facility between uses as much as possible. Examples of high touch surfaces include door handles, light switches, food bars, drinking fountains, toilets, countertops, playground equipment, etc.

Ventilation. Increase circulation of outdoor air and delivery of clean air inside the facility, decreasing the concentration of viral particles.

- When weather permits, open windows and doors to increase air flow from outside.
- Properly maintain the facility HVAC system. Rebalance or adjust HVAC systems to increase total airflow to occupied spaces when possible.
- Use portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) fan/filtration systems to enhance air cleaning.
- Encourage the use of outdoor space when weather permits.

CONSIDERATIONS

School-by-school decisions. Schools should monitor individual site operations to look for trends in cases and clusters. If clusters are continuous or exposures become rampant, schools may need to have short-term transitions to remote/virtual learning to refine operation plans and work with CDH to determine root causes. School-by-school decisions should consider building layout and class sizes to ensure physical distancing can be maintained as much as possible.

- **Variations in grade levels.** Consider cases, exposures, and quarantine patterns among grade levels. Elementary schools may be able to manage distancing, keep static groups, etc., which may make it easier to prevent clusters.

Extra-curricular activities. Any activity where masking and distancing cannot take place is high-risk unless all participants are fully vaccinated. Evaluate programs, sports, and other activities offered on behalf of or in partnership with the school to see determine enhanced safety procedures and reduce opportunities for transmission.

Policy Considerations

- School-wide asynchronous learning opportunities should be available to ensure those students that are in isolation or quarantine are able to access quality education as if they were in the classroom.
- Continue to report exposures to CDH and provide timely communication to families.
- A plan for students with higher risk of severe illness who do not wish to attend in-person learning.
- Strengthened communication plans to the school community.